

# KÁROLY SZOKOLAY

## THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING POETRY

**Abstract:** Translating poetry from one language into others has always been a complicated task for translators because of several reasons. One of them is the different characters of the different languages from a poetic point of view, another is the different possibilities of expressing the same feelings, ideas, music in different languages. I have tried to collect the views of poets in various countries with different languages concerning the translation of poetry. At the same time I would like to demonstrate the high quality of poetry translation by the greatest Hungarian poets.

Most translators, poets, linguist and theorists of literary translation agree in stating that poetry cannot be translated perfectly or even adequately from one language into another. This does not mean that they are against verse translation. Let me quote some authors to illustrate this. Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle (USA) say that "No translation of a poem is the same as the original, but half of the sense of a great poem is better than none at all."<sup>1</sup> David Daiches (Great Britain) says, "I do not believe that most poetry can be adequately translated. But I believe that we should keep on trying, as the attempt, however imperfect, keeps us aware of the living reality of other literatures and of the insights achieved by writers who operate in an unknown language."<sup>2</sup> Edwin Morgan, the well-known Scottish poet and translator of Hungarian poetry is more pessimistic about the successful translation of poetry. He acknowledges that "poetry is the most difficult kind of utterance to translate" and adds at the same time that "not everyone would go as far as the American poet Robert Frost who said that poetry is what gets lost in translation."<sup>3</sup>

Sceptically, other specialists give different explanations. Merwin Jones (Great Britain) says, for example, that his disbelief may be based upon an old prejudice. But as a novelist he does believe that prose can be translated.<sup>4</sup> Michael Hamburger (Great Britain), however, does not make a distinction between translating poetry on the one hand and prose and drama on the other. He says, „I believe that some poetry is at least as translatable as any kind of literature, such as novels and plays."<sup>5</sup>

Jascha Kessler (USA) believes in adequate translations of poetry, but only on condition it is done by poets. He stands by his own experience as a

poet, saying "because I have done so, from Persian and from Hungarian, and I have been assured that my work has been excellent, that is faithful, and honest, and close and direct, and good in English too, so that it is readable and can afford a reader the feel and sense of the original, in a contemporary American language."<sup>6</sup>

What do Hungarian specialists say about the possibility of translating poetry well? The essence of Miklós Vajda's ideas is that a verse-translation is always a compromise, because, as he says, "a poem will necessarily suffer certain losses in the process of translation, even very good translation, and even when, as sometimes happens, the translation is actually a finer poem than its original."<sup>7</sup>

Vajda developed an elaborated and logically very well constructed theory before coming to that conclusion. His starting point is the comparison of poetry and music from the point of view of interpretation. He says, "poetry, like music, appears to be totally at the mercy of its interpreters."<sup>8</sup> But while music is always composed in a so-called "international language", where internationally accepted standards exist and help the listeners to determine whether the particular piece of music is valuable and represents great art or not, poetry through translation is vulnerable because of the multiple barriers of the target language. It is, therefore, always bound to suffer. "Poetry is not written for the purpose of translation", says Vajda, and he is perfectly right.

We can only agree with his next statement as well, which says, "It will suffer even more in the case of poetry from minor languages, like Hungarian, being translated into major ones, because such work has no significant traditions."<sup>9</sup>

The theory of literary translation is a young discipline. We Hungarians are lucky to have not only excellent verse translators but theorists as well. Most of the practising translators and the theorists are the same persons, which is a good thing.

Árpád Göncz, as an excellent contemporary translator and theorist, describes an interesting phenomenon which most of our good verse translators have been influenced by in the past, even if they did not express it. Göncz says, "For what has turned dry for the speaker of the native language is still colour, picture for the translator and because he is following it to its roots, its origins, he digs out its equivalent from a deeper layer of his mother tongue, making his translation a bit more colourful spontaneously."<sup>10</sup>

György Somlyó says that "our verse translation made by our best poets, always rises to the level of the original"<sup>11</sup>, but he is sceptical at the same time, asking himself whether we do not imprint the special world of forms and poetic imagination of Hungarian poetry on the foreign poems.

What are the criteria of any good verse translation? I think it must be faithful, honest, good in the target language, and afford the reader the feel and sense of the original.

The best verse translations have always been faithful in Hungarian even when they seem, at first sight, to be unfaithful to some extent. This reminds me of the title of a book by György Rába on verse translations by Babits, Kosztolányi and Árpád Tóth which says, "The Pretty Unfaithful Ones" (A szép hűtlenek).

The question arises: how can even the best poet-translator reflect the feel and sense of the original in another language without falsifying it a bit? It is easy to accept Jascha Kessler's idea of adequate translation of poetry but most translators confess (either to their readers or only to themselves) that they make compromises. Of course much depends on the extent of that compromise. There is somewhere a border between faithfulness of that kind and falsification. The translator falsifies of course, when he passes that particular limit.

It is a well-known fact in the Hungarian literature that our great poets from Vörösmarty, Petőfi and Arany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (think of their Shakespeare-translations!) throughout Babits, Kosztolányi and Árpád Tóth in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, up to our contemporary poets like Weöres, György Somlyó, László Nagy, Zsuzsa Rab, István Kormos as well as a number of other excellent poet translators, have created many masterpieces of verse translations in our literature. The required standard in this field has been very high since the second half of the last century. That standard was set by János Arany both with his own translations (first and foremost by his *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and his theoretical works on the principles of translation. And in spite of such high principles and practical results, our critics and theorists are not satisfied. The higher our standards are, the more the critics require from the translators. And they see the limits, or rather, the barriers of verse translation, at the same time. Of course, any nation will necessarily discover such barriers, depending on traditions of their own verse translation. Poetry suffers more in the case of poetry from minor languages, or, as James Kirkup calls them "minority languages"<sup>12</sup>, like Hungarian, being translated into major ones, because such work has no significant traditions. The lack of such traditions in major languages, like English, French, German or Russian is caused by the fact that they did not need such a high level of translation as minor nations. They had good translations from Greek and Latin, and from one another, but in most cases they were not made by great poets and did not serve such purposes as translations for minor nations. Nations such as the Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Serbs, Croats and the like had to create their

modern national literary language in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to fulfil that task they needed translations of great English, French and German masters. They had to enrich their poetry with translations, but the first reason was to create a suitable language for literature in general, and for the theatre and national drama in particular. It was not by chance that under the influence of A.W. Schlegel a Shakespeare cult started in Hungary, for example.

The difference in interests in verse translation between minor and major nations is disappearing in our time. Edwin Morgan saw it in 1967 when writing, "I see the translation of poetry as a gradually developing art which still has a long way to go."<sup>13</sup>

In that development the theory of literary translation has an important role, as both Edwin Morgan and Anton Popovic emphasise.<sup>14</sup> Though the disadvantages of small nations are diminishing, there is still much to be done. That is why Iván Boldizsár says, "translation has been largely a one-way-street: the small nations hasten to translate all that is worthwhile of the great nations' literature into their own language, but not vice versa."<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, there are more and more men of letters in the Western countries who recognise the needs of small nations' poetry. David Daiches (Great Britain) says, for example, "I fully appreciate the problem of small nations... and I realise how unfair it is that they translate into their languages from the major languages of Europe while excellent work of their own is not translated out of the languages of small nations into those of the larger, and as a consequence much fine literary work remains largely unknown."<sup>16</sup>

At the same time more and more Hungarian poems have been translated into Russian, German, French and English. As for the English translations, the editors of the New Hungarian Quarterly, with the help of English poets like Edwin Morgan, William Jay Smith, Daniel Hoffman, Donald Davie and others, do much in spreading Hungarian poetry in English abroad and, in addition, at a rather high level. The collaboration of British and American poets, and Hungarian makers of good rough translations, has proved useful, though we have to admit that it is a forced solution. As Miklós Vajda states, "A good rough translation is a close, literal, prose version of a poem in another language – another, additional necessary evil in a complex transaction that is itself a necessary evil, arising out of our linguistic diversity."<sup>17</sup>

Calling to our mind Vajda's essay entitled *The Price of Verse Translation* we will remember "the first necessary evil" in his theory, which is translation from the original. But we cannot demand that poets of major nations learn our language, therefore the use of rough translations is the only solution.



However, it is very important that **poets** translate poetry, even though with the help of rough translations.

Lev Ozerov asks in the title of one of his essays, "Are translators born?" It reminds us of the Roman saying: "Poeta nascitur non fit." (Poets are born, not made). Ozerov raises here a very logical series of questions: "Are translators born? Where does a translator begin? When he falls in love with the original? How does love for the original begin? With a sense of discovery? And what breeds with a sense of discovery?"<sup>18</sup>

I think these questions are very important. But who can answer them?

As for the training of translators, which is Ozerov's main topic in his essays, I am sceptical about it. Perhaps translators of prose and drama can be trained, but translators of poetry? I cannot believe it. The general result of creating verse translations by non-poets is that the poems are flat, dead and uninteresting. It does not matter whether the non-poet translator is English, Hungarian, Russian or whatever. Only a poet can feel the colour that words receive from their neighbours, the slightly new meaning, the range of sound effects, the music of poetry, and the tone and feeling of the poem, which is the most important thing, even if it is almost undefinable.

As for the traditions of translation in the major nations, perhaps the Germans have achieved the most. They had already started translating French and English drama (first of all Shakespeare and, in addition, in blank verse) at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only the older tradition of the art of translation into German succeeds, but the attitude of the German language to follow several different foreign metrical forms. While in English poetry the iambic forms rule, in German literature we can find several different metrical forms. Most classical metres are quite natural in German, just as in Hungarian. Here is one example from Friedrich Hölderlin:

Aber wir, zufrieden gesellt, wie die liebenden Schwäne,  
Wenn sie ruhen am See, oder auf Wellen gewiegt,  
Niedersehn in die Wasser, wo silberne Wolken sich  
spiegeln,  
Und ätherisches Blau unter dem Schiffenden wallt.

The same lines in Hungarian:

Úgy éltünk, akár a szerelmes hattyúk a fényben,  
csöndesen úszkálnak, ringnak a fodrokon át,  
s nézik a tó tükörében az ezüst felhők vonulását,  
míg hűvös éteri kék fodroz a testük alatt.

(Translated by Miklós Radnóti)

Greek and Latin metres did not become implanted in Great Britain, as they did in Germany and Hungary. The character of a language determines what poetic forms it is able to use. Poems written in distichs are easy to translate from Hungarian into German and vice versa, because both languages can use that metrical form. Friedrich Schiller writes,

In Hexameter steigt des Springquells flüssigs Säule,  
Im Pentameter drauf fällt sie melodisch hersb.

In Hungarian:

Hexameterben tör fel az égnek a karcsu szökőkút,  
S pentameterben hull dallamos íve alá.

(Translated by István Tóthfalusi)

As Erika Szepes and István Szerdahelyi define in their book *Prosody* (Verstan), the English system of versification is "accent-changing", which shifted towards metrical versification under the influence of classical forms. But because the English language has plenty of monosyllabic words, mainly the iamb and trocheus have spread and become most popular in English poetry. No wonder that blank verse became the permanent metrical form of English poetry in every respect: it is enough to think of such great poets as Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, etc. The poetry of every nation can be great by its own laws. There are several forms in the world which cannot be used properly in Hungarian, for example the so-called Chinese syllable-counting verse can be translated into most foreign languages only by using a similar verse-form, not the same.

Here is an example for that in Hungarian:

Síkon szép fák,  
lombjuk tömött,  
Látod, uram -  
úgy örülök!

Síkon szép fák,  
lombjuk ragyog.  
Soha, milyen  
boldog vagyok!

(Translated by László Lator)

There are sometimes exceptions among great poets who use unusual metrical forms in their native language. Here is Charles Algernon Swinburne, for example:

(Sapphics)

All the night sleep came not upon my eyelids,  
Shed not dew, nor shook nor unclosed a feather,  
Yet with lips shut close and with eyes of iron  
Stood and beheld me.

As for using different metrical forms, my conclusion must be the following: the more metrical forms a language is able to use, the more metrical forms can be translated into it. From this point of view the Hungarian language can be regarded as a unique one. Hungarian poets have used a great many forms of verse. But this means at the same time, of course, that a part of our poems cannot be translated properly into several major languages. That may be the reason why the French often translate poetry into prose. As for modern translators of Hungarian poetry into English, they try to follow the original metrical forms.

Finally I must emphasise the role of the poet in verse-translation. In his essay Edwin Morgan is tempted to say, "if the translator gives us a good poem it can't be a close translation, and if it is a close translation it can't be a good poem. The man who knows the foreign text best is quite likely to be a scholar and not a poet."<sup>19</sup>

I perfectly agree with Edwin Morgan when he says that "somehow the translator must produce the emotional »lift« of poetry, and to get this he has to throw out ballast of various kinds, and the first thing to go, the least indispensable thing, will be literal accuracy."<sup>20</sup>

I think most of our Hungarian poets who are translators as well know this very well and do what Edwin Morgan did, even when György Rába says, "Verse-translation is like making a circle into a quadrangle."

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle in: Small countries, great literatures? Published by the Hungarian Publishers' and Booksellers' Association, An international inquiry of the Hungarian Book Review, p.22
- <sup>2</sup> the same p.19
- <sup>3</sup> Edwin Morgan: Poetry and Translation, The New Hungarian Quarterly, Vol. VIII. Spring 1967, p.28
- <sup>4</sup> Merwin Jones in: Small countries, great literatures? p.40
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Hamburger in: Small countries, great literatures? p.34
- <sup>6</sup> Jascha Kessler in: Small countries, great literatures? p.44
- <sup>7</sup> Miklós Vajda: The Price of Verse Translation, The New Hungarian Quarterly, Vol. XXI. Summer 1980, p.110
- <sup>8</sup> the same, p.107
- <sup>9</sup> the same, p.107
- <sup>10</sup> Árpád Göncz: A fordítás helye és feladata a magyar irodalomban, in: A műfordítás ma, Tanulmányok, Gondolat, Budapest, 1981, p.54
- <sup>11</sup> György Somlyó: Két szó között, in: A műfordítás ma, Tanulmányok, Gondolat, Budapest, 1981, p.108
- <sup>12</sup> James Kirkup in: Small countries, great literatures? p.45
- <sup>13</sup> Edwin Morgan: Poetry and Translation, The New Hungarian Quarterly, Vol. VIII, Spring 1967, p.27
- <sup>14</sup> Anton Popovic: The Contemporary State of the Theory of Literary Translation, in BABEL, Vol. XXV, N° 3-4/ 1978. p.111
- <sup>15</sup> Iván Boldizsár: in: Small Countries, Great Literatures? p. 11
- <sup>16</sup> David Daiches in: Small Countries, Great Literatures? p. 18
- <sup>17</sup> Miklós Vajda: The Price of Verse Translation, The New Hungarian Quarterly, Vol. XXI. Summer 1980, p.112
- <sup>18</sup> Lev Ozerov: Are Translators Born? BABEL, Vol. XXV, N° 1/1979, p.11
- <sup>19</sup> Edwin Morgan: Poetry and Translation, The New Hungarian Quarterly, Vol. VIII, Spring 1967, p.29
- <sup>20</sup> the same, p.29